Globe and mail
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E-BIZ

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How to take your discussion off-line

One of the most useful aspects of the Internet is undoubtedly electronic mail. People are taking to E-mail with a vengeance, sending and receiving billions of messages every year. E-mail addresses have become *de rigueur* on business cards and have quickly become the fax numbers of the late nineties.

As people have become more accustomed to E-mail, they've started to use it for rather unintended purposes. Quite often, they'll use it for what we might call "on-line collaboration."

Someone will send a message out to 10 or 20 people about something. One of those individuals responds, copying it to all of the original recipients. Before they know it, group members have an on-line discussion happening through their E-mail boxes.

Unfortunately, using E-mail this way is often unwieldy, as all the responses to the original message soon begin to pile up and clutter everyone else's mailbox.

That is where software such as Lotus Notes comes in. It is an extremely powerful tool that excels at providing the capability to collaborate on-line.

Equipped in this way, Lotus Notes has been able to transform the very essence of many major companies, as it has come to encourage a culture of information sharing. With the emergence of its Domino software, Lotus has extended the power of Notes to the Web, allowing all kinds of on-line discussions and collaboration.

We've seen many organizations build discussion groups into their Web sites, in order to encourage feedback or commentary. This capability is often one of the key features to a successful Web site. Yet as powerful as it is, a system like Notes can sometimes amount to overkill in terms of sophistication. It can also be positioned beyond the budgets of many smaller organizations or individuals. In addition, adding discussion capability to a Web site hasn't been easy for many people.

That's where a new free service known as Take It Offline comes in. The program — which has just appeared in the past few days — allows anyone to instantly create their own on-line discussion group in a matter of seconds.

The service is named after the phrase often used when people start discussing something via E-mail that they may not want to share with others. Hang around on the Internet long enough and you'll often see people suggest to someone else that they "take it off-line."

The service is stunningly easy to use. Travel to the Take It Offline Web site — **www.takeitoffline.com** — and in seconds, you can create a topic. Type in a title for the discussion, your E-mail address and a brief description to start people off.

Then, advise people of the address where they can join the topic. They can travel there, read comments that have been posted and add their own. If they wish, they can quickly create their own subtopic.

In a matter of moments, you can have your own instant little discussion group under way.

A Take It Offline discussion can be made public — simply advise people of how they can join. If you prefer that it be private, you simply send an E-mail message to those who you wish to invite to the discussion and advise them of the Web address.

It's not completely private, since passwords aren't required. But other people won't be able to find it, given that the Web address for your discussion is a long, complicated, randomly generated string of characters.

To get an idea of how the service can be used, I've created my own little discussion space on Take It Offline. You can find it via the Internet, **www.jimcarroll.com/ebiz.htm**, but if you prefer, visit the site and start your own little conversation.

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